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Research Article

Supporting Black African Students to Engage More in Physical Activity: A Qualitative Study of Lived Experiences in the Midlands, UK

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Aim. To explore how Black African international students adjust to their new university environment and gain insight into how they feel supported to engage in physical activity (PA). *Background*. People from ethnic minority backgrounds have poor physical activity levels compared with white populations in the UK. The Black population is known to have the lowest PA levels among the ethnic minority groups in the UK. This trend is suggested to be the case among university students, but no research has examined this. Ethnic minority students, including international students, encounter adaptation difficulties such as cultural barriers and social isolation which affect their university experiences and health behaviours such as physical activity. *Methodology*. This was a qualitative method, with in-depth semistructured interviews conducted with five African students (two males and three females) aged between 21 and 40 years from a university in the West Midlands. The transcribed interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. *Results/Findings*. Culture and lifestyle of physical activity; knowledge, experience, and self-motivation; the effect of various social groups, activities, and services at the university; and weather variations and physical settings were the identified themes. The key finding of the study is that respondents engaged in PA to a greater extent at the British university than they did in their home countries. This was due to a combination of factors, including low-cost gym memberships and events and a general lack of racial or gender-based discrimination. *Conclusions/Recommendations*. Participants expressed satisfaction with the cultural and social support systems at their university, such as sports clubs and societies, and mental health support services that encouraged them to learn about and engage more in physical activity. Although some barriers, such as weather variations, were mentioned, various indoor options coupled with cheaper gymnasiums motivated students to remain or become active. Understanding the experiences of minority student groups in physical activity could help in reviewing current provisions and extending them to a wider population.

1. Introduction

Physical inactivity is identified as a major challenge for population health in the United Kingdom (UK) and its consequences cost the UK an estimated £ 7.4 billion annually [1]. Globally, physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality accounting for 6% of all deaths [2]. Physical inactivity (PI) is a term used to describe individuals who do not engage in the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID)'s recommended levels of physical activity [3]. According to the

OHID [1], one in every three men and one in every two women in the UK are not physically active enough to keep healthy. This trend is seen across different population groups and is identified as severe among ethnic minority groups in the UK [4]. Black and minority ethnic populations in the UK have lower levels of physical activity than the white British population [5, 6]. Among ethnic minority groups, the Black population is reported to have the lowest levels of physical activity [5, 6]. These levels are significantly lower than those recommended by the UK PA guidelines [7].

Evidence suggests that black and minority populations encounter related challenges, including a lack of time and motivation [8, 9]. Other subtle barriers include perceptual differences in physical activity and sociocultural barriers [10]. In a qualitative review, Ige-Elegbede et al. [8] found that adults from ethnic minority groups encounter many challenges, including social responsibilities and the lack of a suitable environment for physical activity. Such et al. [4] identify that the situation is further complicated by differences within minority groups regarding gender, migration history, socioeconomic background, and other individual variables, warranting more specific and culturally appropriate interventions to increase participation. A UK-based qualitative study by Kakito and Davies [11] examined socioecological determinants of physical activity among 12 minority ethnic immigrants using semistructured interviews. The results indicated that intrapersonal factors such as lack of motivation, perception, cultural norms, and expectations, as well as environmental factors such as family and friend support, subscription cost, and weather, acted as barriers to physical activity. A notable limitation in the literature is the relatively low number of studies examining physical activity among black and ethnic minority groups compared to the literature focusing on white and general populations [9, 12].

Research suggests an increasing trend of sedentary behaviours among university students, which is common even among non-UK universities [13–15]. In the UK, data collected from over 9,000 students across 101 higher education schools in the British Active Students Survey (BASS) suggest that 14% of the students spend less than 30 minutes in PA [16]. A systematic review by Castro et al. [17] found higher sedentary behaviours in university students than young adults in the general population, which is an upward trend. Although limited, evidence indicates that UK university students are at risk for elevated sedentary behaviours. These patterns of sedentary behaviours extend to university students from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK, but few studies have investigated this [16, 18]. A report by the UK Active Research Institute [16] found that students from minority ethnic backgrounds are less physically active than their white counterparts. Aceijas et al. [19] consider too that ethnic minority students generally maintain suboptimal physical activity levels, with Black students experiencing the lowest levels among these ethnic groups. Physical activity influences students' health and wellbeing, which in turn impact academic attainment [20, 21]. Research emphasises that students who engage in the recommended levels of physical activity have positive health outcomes, including good mental health, compared to those who are less active [20]. More recently, it has also been found that sedentary behaviours are increasing among university students, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation [22, 23].

While physical inactivity is a global issue, there are unique barriers to physical activity among university students, as highlighted across various studies [24–26]. A qualitative study by Deliens et al. [24] engaged 46 Belgian students to understand their physical activity behaviours.

Through semistructured focus group discussions, the researchers identified several factors contributing to poor levels of physical activity among students. Despite the university being well equipped with facilities, students reported a lack of information about these resources. Additional barriers included environmental factors such as weather and climate, student accommodations, academic demands, self-discipline, and time constraints. The BASS data [16] further indicated that students were often too busy with their studies or engaged in other social activities rather than physical activity. Some students also found the cost of participating in physical activities prohibitive. Similar barriers were identified in two Spanish studies. According to Gómez-López et al. [25], laziness, lack of social support, lack of time, and a perceived lack of practical benefits deterred some students from engaging in physical activity. Martínez-Lemos et al. [26] reported that students cited laziness, work commitments, and time constraints as barriers.

A study by Ndupu et al. [27] examining physical activity barriers for both university students and staff in the UK found similar issues. The results indicated that lack of opportunities, motivation, and capability were major barriers. Although participants viewed the availability of sports complexes as a motivator for engaging in physical activity, financial constraints often limited their access to these facilities. The evidence suggests that university students face numerous challenges that hinder their participation in physical activity. In addition, given the low levels of physical activity among minority groups in the UK and the limited supporting evidence, Black and other minority students may be particularly impacted by these barriers.

Students' health outcomes and academic attainment directly and indirectly reflect their physical, social, and mental health during their time at university [28]. Currently, universities are actively seeking effective strategies to improve the positive health and wellbeing of their student body [29, 30]. However, this pursuit is complicated by the increasing diversity among students, especially with the rising numbers of international students, posing challenges in providing adequate support [31, 32]. Yet, little work has been carried out to explore student perceptions of support to be physically active [33], including amongst international students from ethnic minority backgrounds [34]. While existing research on ethnic minority students has delved into topics such as racism [35] and acculturation [36], the domain of physical activity remains relatively unexplored. This is an important area that warrants further investigation and scholarly attention given its significant link to educational and health outcomes.

The present study investigated the experiences of Black African International (BAI) students (international students of African descent) studying in the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on their feelings about support to develop and/or maintain a physically active lifestyle. BAI students make an important input to UK universities, making significant economic contributions and enhancing diversity within university culture [34], fostering a rich academic environment with enhanced global perspectives [34]. Therefore, providing them with appropriate support systems

to enhance their health, wellbeing, and academic prospects is important to optimise benefits for the institution and wider student body, as well as for the individual BAI student. This study was motivated by the identification of these benefits, and the need for further understanding in order to devise and maintain effective interventions and strategies aimed at enhancing physical activity levels and promoting the overall health and wellbeing of minority student groups. Given the increasing enrolment of ethnic minorities and international students, including BAI students in UK universities annually [31, 32] and the current health crises of students [22, 23], the need for this understanding is urgent.

1.1. Aim. To gain insight into how Black African international students feel supported in engaging in physical activity (PA).

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design. Our ontological position is based on the idealist belief that reality exists and that it can be demonstrated through multiple truths [37, 38]. The epistemological belief that supported our ontological position was that truth can be investigated individually. This interpretive position stems from the rationale that reality can have multiple complex and single meanings; therefore, it is imperative to investigate them subjectively [39]. We employed the inductive reasoning method using a subjective and interpretive approach to explore the lived experiences of the participants, which was informed by our research philosophy. This directed our research strategies and methodological approaches [38]. Exploring the in-depth lived experiences of BAI students through the interpretive position supported this research to provide a robust understanding and unique experiences of the participants regarding how they experienced physical activity individually at their university, thus addressing the research goal.

2.2. Participants. Participants for this research were selected through an invitation sent to social media groups at the selected university. Since the study focused on Black African students, the invitation targeted international student groups with clear eligibility criteria. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study emailed the first author to express their interest in the study. The researcher responded by sending the participant information form to assist them in making informed decisions and the consent form to complete in order to partake in the research. As the research was conducted during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible options for face-to-face and online interviews were provided to the respondents to choose the most suitable.

Five African students from a single university were recruited for this study using purposive sampling. They comprised undergraduate students (one male and one female) and postgraduate students (two females and one male).

2.3. Data Collection. Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect participants' unique experiences. This study was conducted between June and July 2020. Three participants were interviewed face to face while observing the social distancing regulations following the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining two participants were interviewed online using Microsoft Teams. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

In the observance of potential challenges that may arise, as suggested by Busetto et al. [40], all equipment was checked frequently to minimise technical issues, and online respondents were supported on how to use teams for the interview. The research instruments, including the study guide, were piloted with student volunteers. The pilot study assisted in assessing how realistic and workable our research instruments were and minimised potential problems, supporting the feasibility of the study.

Our sample size selection was informed by the concepts of information power and philosophical positions. Information power is a concept in qualitative research that holds the belief that fewer participants are required when a sample contains information relevant to the study [41]. Since we were interested in how physical activity was individually experienced by students and in finding unique voices on how they understood their new environment, five participants were suitable to achieve this goal. According to Thanh and Thanh [42], interpretivists seek to unravel individuals' unique voices and how they experience reality.

2.4. Data Analysis. The first author listened to the audio-recorded data three times during the transcription process to familiarise themselves with the data. The transcripts were then anonymised, with all personal and identifiable information removed by the first author. Both authors double checked these processes to ensure robustness. Subsequently, the anonymised data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework [43]: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, and reporting. This framework aims to systematically and rigorously extract themes from qualitative data.

Data familiarisation involved reading each transcribed interview three times. During these readings, an active, critical, and analytic evaluation was conducted, with the first author taking notes to develop a thorough understanding of the data, resulting in data immersion. Codes were generated through an iterative process among the authors; the first author initially coded the five transcripts, which were then collaboratively evaluated and confirmed by both authors. This approach ensured reliability and prevented arbitrary or biased conclusions. The codes were scrutinised to identify patterns relevant to the research questions and to extract meanings from the dataset. This included common ideas identified from recurring codes, representing the prominent ideas and experiences of the participants. The patterns from the codes were then sorted and categorised into themes, establishing coherence and structure. The identified themes were reviewed individually and collectively before final selection and report generation.

2.5. Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is a key way for researchers to convince readers that their research is worthy and deserves attention [44]. We conducted and discussed the code charts and data interpretation. According to Elo et al. [45], feedback from experts and peers is the key to ensuring credibility in research; they help prevent the misinterpretation of participants' responses. The study was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist [46]. The piloting of research instruments also ensured the accuracy and efficiency of the data collection tools. When credibility, transferability, and dependability are well established, confirmability is guaranteed [45]. Therefore, the pragmatic measures applied in this study assured trustworthiness, as expected from the qualitative study.

2.6. Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Worcester Ethics Committee where the first author was a student and the second a member of academic staff. The UK Data Protection Legislation [47] guided this study on how the participants' information was managed. The respondents had the opportunity to ask for clarification regarding their understanding of the purpose of the study which aided them in making informed decisions based on their knowledge and understanding of the study. This agrees with the principle of respect for people in public health research ethics which instructs participants to provide informed consent before engaging in public health research [48]. The interview questions were structured to prevent harm to participants (including their mental health and wellbeing). It was very unlikely for participants to encounter any threat, as no concerns were raised in the pilot study, but measures were implemented to mitigate potential risks. These measures included signposting students who may become concerned during or after an interview session to support services available at their university and community, which included Samaritan groups, wellbeing hubs, and Healthy Mind groups.

3. Findings

The following four themes were identified: (i) culture and lifestyle of physical activity; (ii) the environment and climate, physical settings, and weather variations; (iii) the effects of a variety of social groups, activities, and services; and (iv) self-motivation, knowledge, and experience of physical activity. The description of the participants is shown in Table 1.

3.1. Culture and Lifestyle of Physical Activity. All interviewees suggested that they were physically active at their university. According to their narratives, physical activity was instrumental in daily life; some participants explained that their experience in the UK made them physically active, and others advised that they were specifically encouraged to maintain physical activity:

"Back home I didn't really have like someone that would motivate me, go with me, I was basically too busy. I don't know what I was doing but I was really busy all the time back home, but here is very convenient" (Nick)

"I wasn't a consistent person when it comes to physical activities, I would only do it when I felt like I can do it or whenever I had time. But having realised that with the psycho-emotional problems that I had regarding my integration into the new society, or my interaction with the culture of the United Kingdom. This on its own gave me a highlight that. . . you can be a consistent or loyal person with physical activity" (Ella)

Some participants emphasised the newness of the lifestyle or culture of physical activities they observed in their University environment. This was disclosed when participants were prompted to compare their experiences in the UK to their home countries.

"First thing I notice, they jog a lot here, back home in my country a lot of people jog as well but not as here. It's like say you see Mr. Johnson jogging by, it's a normal occurrence. Back home, my country right, if you see this guy jogging it's either he's preparing for something, or he is just being fit it's not a normal thing you see regularly". (Nick)

"In my country, we do a lot of activities, physical activities, football, basketball, the way we do it here in UK. But for me, the same way I do my physical activities here, they're the same, I do it in Nigeria. I used to be a captain in Nigeria in my secondary school". (Joe)

Two female participants introduced a narrative on gender when contrasting the UK and their home countries. They emphasised that the support they have received so far in the UK has motivated them to stay more active than in their home countries. Their narratives suggest a more inclusive approach to physical activity in their university environment compared with what they experienced in their home countries.

"I don't think it's the culture here in Sudan to exercise or have exercise, it's usually more gender oriented. usually, men or boys go outside and play football and exercise more than women do. I would say in Sudan, I think because of the cultures and gender roles, women here are more like domestically oriented. So, they do a lot of work, but it's usually related to the household or some women, like even other parts of the country, do most of the family work like they go to the farms." (Vicky)

"physical activity in our culture in Africa might not mean modern physical activity, like what you know directly doing physical activity; I am exercising, I'm into the gym, I'm probably doing aerobics or anything of that sort. Because in Africa, we do most of physical jobs. Like I would say, part of the physical activities, we will do indirectly. Let me talk of farms you see at the farms, there certain things that we do at the farms." (Ella)

"security-wise, like you don't want to be as a lady you have to be very conscious of what you wear or how you engage with your physical activity [talking about the experience in her home country]." (Lois)

TABLE 1: List of participants, their descriptions, and country of origin.

Participant (anonym)	Description
Participant 1 (Ella)	A 40-year-old female undergraduate student from Botswana
Participant 2 (Vicky)	A 34-year-old female postgraduate student from Sudan
Participant 3 (Joe)	A 21-year-old male undergraduate student from Nigeria
Participant 4 (Nick)	A 27-year-old male postgraduate student from Nigeria
Participant 5 (Lois)	A 29-year-old female postgraduate student from Nigeria

Overall, the theme underscores the importance of an active culture, as perceived by the participants, in motivating their involvement in physical activity. Many participants experienced a positive cultural shock regarding active behaviours and practices in the UK compared to their home countries. This cultural contrast played a key role in encouraging them to stay active. A culturally distinct understanding of physical activity, especially concerning women's involvement, was a common sentiment among female participants when comparing the UK and their home countries. Recognising physical activity as an adaptation mechanism in the UK proved beneficial for some participants, highlighting its significance in supporting mental health-related benefits.

3.2. The Environment and Climate, Physical Settings, and Weather Variations. All the participants spoke about how their university influenced their perception and experience of physical activity. A major focus was on the physical setting of the university. Joe and Ella mentioned that their university's physical environment encouraged them to improve their active lifestyles.

"I think they [the university] have helped me by providing a lot of things needed, we have the gym, we have the pitch where you can play before the COVID. Sometimes when you feel like "I need some training to improve myself", you book the field. And when you book the field, you do a lot of training, spend a lot of time with what you love to do. So, the university has provided a lot of opportunities to improve ourselves and I do improve myself." (Joe)

"The university on its own is located in a very large space area. So that on its own even if you want to exercise away from the university community, you can still do that. Using the other routes that are within the university campus. I'll just give an example, just around from one gate at St. Johns to that other main entrance gate that one round on its own is actually enough to give it the output goal that you think you can have when you are doing physical exercise. So, I'll say the university is well-built and well-aligned to encourage physical activity." (Ella)

Another emphasis was the availability and proximity of facilities. Some participants mentioned the significant role of specific support package initiatives, such as free gym membership that was available at their university accommodation, which encouraged them to be physically active.

"The fact that physical activity or exercise or gym room was a part of the package of my admission contract. You see, that on its own automatically made me to be entangled . . . So, I guess it was an advantage in a way." (Ella)

"I found out that accommodation even though was really expensive I found out that it comes out with like a free membership for gym. So, I found okay if I'm paying a lot of money I must as well use the gym." (Nick)

"back home I was more outdoor than indoors but here like the facilities that are made available to you at a very good price made me engaged to gym more. So, I would say my experience has just been really good, has been comfortable, I've love it so far. The gym is readily available to me; most times, they are really close to you. Like I think the gym is quite like five minutes away from the house." (Lois)

"people from, say, higher socioeconomic background, they afford like going to the gym [comparing her university experience to home country]." (Vicky)

Furthermore, participants revealed that the weather in the UK was conducive to exercise compared to that in their home countries where the high temperatures discouraged them from exercising during afternoon. Some respondents explained that the activities they engaged in back home were mostly outdoors which the weather did not favour; however, in the UK, indoor facilities motivated them to exercise even at unfavourable seasonal changes. Nick saw exercise as a coping mechanism for cold UK weather.

"the extreme hot weather here [Talking about home country] would also prevent you from doing lots of physical activity. Unless you join in the gym where you know that the environment would be a little bit colder for you to actually exercise a lot and sweat a lot. Otherwise, the weather on its own again doesn't really favour the physical activity unlike in the UK." (Ella)

"I understand now that it helps me with the weather. But back home you know, it just more or less for a stamina or look good and I can just play basketball regularly or football regularly. there's some difference here because now it feels like I need it now, I really needed to help my body and to help my blood flow I cannot afford to take that out of place to get frozen or something." (Nick)

The theme highlights the role the university environment played in promoting physical activity among the participants. The availability of relevant facilities and

engagement opportunities encouraged participation. Participants' experiences indicated that the university's promotional strategies, such as offering affordable memberships, motivated some to get involved. This underscores the importance of effective strategies in fostering active participation in physical activity. Engaging in physical activity significantly helped participants adapt better to their new environment.

3.3. The Effects of a Variety of Social Groups, Activities, and Services. The participants suggested that the social climate of their university was essential to their physical activity behaviours. Almost all the participants were registered in at least one social group, including sports clubs and societies which is a relatively high registration rate compared with home students [13]. Examples include football clubs, basketball clubs, yoga societies, and handball clubs. The variable needs and preferences of the participants influenced the choices of social groups.

"Physically, I don't do exercise regularly, but I do in a way or so. I enjoy doing yoga, and walking. I'm not a fan of the gym. I don't like the routine of going in certain times and leaving certain time, I just like to have it more casual. So, I would enjoy more like walking around in a nice place for 30 to 40 minutes a day or something." (Vicky)

"I've also got a lot of teams in the gym and we have like all these scoreboards on it as well. And these people, for example, we have like this biking team. So, you come cycling, you come and then you have to beat the record for someone, so it challenges you. So, I feel like it's a competitive atmosphere, but it's something that I like, so it makes me want to go there because I'm like, oh, you've not gone and your name is on the scoreboard. And I want to go again." (Lois)

The social groups were supportive, as revealed by some of the participants in the interview. Some clubs and societies texted or called their members to remind them of scheduled meetings, which played a significant role in supporting physical activity. Respondents expressed their appreciation for the extent of support they received from their clubs which motivated them to remain physically active.

"when you have a team, and you're working with certain people, it pushes you to do more. So, the handball thing only lasted for like, last semester. So, I'm not maybe going to give you like really good details, because this semester COVID happened, so most of the things that require you to physically be present have been reduced to a minimum. So yes, last semester, it was quite good. And we had like days where we had to meet, and we liked to come together and do like practice and stuff. So, it was really good to get messages, you get prompts to come so if you miss one day, everyone's asking of you." (Lois)

"I got into basketball team so I'm in the 4th team now. I go for practice here and there; I try to play some few games, so the clubs have been really good. They'll welcome me if

I've not paid for my club subscription, they welcomed me. There was a huge support. There's a lot of support, a lot of support for sports or the school is really big on sports, and I've noticed that"' (Nick)

"I joined the yoga and I go every week until it stopped because the COVID, but I was committed to that because, for me, it was a group exercise. There is a lot of things that you can do to talk to people, and it's my favourite thing to do yoga. I really like it." (Vicky)

Another dimension revealed in participants' narratives was assistance from university support services. Some respondents revealed that support services such as mental health and counselling services signposted them through emails and leaflets to the resources and facilities that assisted them in maintaining an active lifestyle.

"it [talking about the university] has also services, that I guess I've been a customer or client to that. they have mental services, or they have counselling services where we should always, you know, be well informed. They always use to show us that, you know, this is what we have within the university, we have the gyms just located here. And they'll give you the campus map, they would give you everything so that you can be able to have access to where you can do your physical activity." (Ella)

"So we have basketball, we have a lot of things that university has provided. So, they have supported a lot of students. And sometimes when you read your email, they try to give you a way, I got an email that says, "how to keep healthy". I think that is one of the ways the university has supported us in our physical activities." (Joe)

Theme three captures the role of social groups in students' involvement in physical activity. The participants' experiences highlight the significant impact of social motivators on PA participation. The diverse range of activities offered choices for every participant, ensuring that everyone could find something they enjoyed. The university played a key role in making students aware of these opportunities. Activity groups were supportive, fostering a sense of community and encouraging active participation among their members. Integrating physical activity recommendations into the university's support services was a game changer for many participants, motivating them to engage in physical activity. This reinforces the need for effective intervention strategies to promote physical activity.

3.4. Self-Motivation, Knowledge, and Experience of Physical Activity. The participants expressed that their knowledge and understanding influenced them to make informed decisions and remain active. While some were taught the importance of physical activity for health at school, others had learned the importance of physical activity in their previous job roles and research activities.

"Back in secondary school, we were taught that physical activities are the way you keep yourself in a well hygienic and in a fitful way. I don't know how to explain it with

English, but I think is a way to keep yourself healthy." (Joe)

"My background and my experience as a counsellor, and my knowledge of how it actually can affect you and how it's actually can make you better and improve your mental health. I think always having that in my mind, like, whenever I have a stressful day at work, I talk to my colleagues, Let's just go for a walk." (Vicky).

"I just didn't take it seriously. But I then realised I needed it to actually ensure that every other things like apart from eating, and doing like engaging with other things in life, you needed to have some form of physical activity or some form of sporting activity you are interested in and engaged in it because I just did like loads of research, and you have to be physically fit. If you want to live longer, as well, you need to actually take care of yourself. And that's another form apart from eating and apart from taking water those things are like very very important.' (Lois).

Participants also discussed how the cumulative benefit of physical activity played a key role in encouraging them to stay active and continue to engage.

"I've found that when I do physical activities, I don't complain much of physical illnesses or ailments, or body pains or anything of that sort. And then again, it distracts you from probably being derailed in any way because you're always engaged. And you'd know that your life is between work, physical activity, and all that." (Ella)

"The day I used the gym I used it really well and I found that when I came out, I wasn't feeling as cold as I was feeling before, you know, I was like Oh I'm not all that cold, so I found that you know working-out sweating you know helps your body helps you mainly keep warm. So that was one major factor." (Nick)

"when I started playing football. I wasn't very good. So, a lot of friends made joke out of me; they said you, you can never learn football, you can never do this, you can never do that. So, I'm a type of person that love what I do. And I love to challenge someone in what I love to do. So, I ended up being the captain before I left my secondary school. And right now, I can't stop losing my motivation I keep my head off. And I keep working every single day." (Joe)

This final theme summarises the experience and understanding of the benefits of physical activity in helping participants stay active. The health benefits emphasised the need to maintain an active lifestyle to promote positive health and wellbeing among students. The intrinsic motivation to lead a healthy life and explore new adventures related to physical activity can support the behaviours needed to keep up with the demands of an active life. The participants' experiences highlight these motivations.

Overall, these four themes provide valuable insights into how some BAI students perceived the support they received at their university and how it encouraged them to be physically active. This reiterates the significant impact of effective strategies in supporting minority groups with physical activity. It can be inferred that the combination of these strategies significantly contributed to the students' active lifestyles.

4. Discussion

This study found that students felt supported at their university to become or remain physically active. Most explained that they increased their engagement in physical activity because of the support they received from their university. The contrast between home and UK experiences reveals the significant role of the new university environment in this success. This finding was consistent with that reported by Marshall et al. [49] which, although not conducted in the UK but in the US, found too that an active university culture supports students' physical activity. However, our finding contradicts the findings of Alloh et al. [50] that some Nigerian students have poor physical activity at their UK university. We found that this difference is partly because the accounts of our participants showed that they were supported through free gym memberships, social clubs, and other services which were lacking in the report of Alloh et al. [50]. However, Alloh et al. [50] did not provide detailed explanation for their claim, as their study targeted the general health outcome of the students rather than their physical activity.

The literature [8, 10, 51] suggests that despite the beneficial role of culture in promoting identity, it can also be a major barrier to some health behaviours, such as physical activity, especially among ethnic minority groups. This is evidenced in the studies of S. Koshoedo et al. [51], Darr et al. [52], and Kakito and Davies [11] that some individuals from ethnic minority groups lack support from their social horizons, such as families, which essentially affects their confidence to stay active. Ige-Elegbede et al. [8] highlighted that some ethnic minorities feel less welcomed in public sports facilities because these facilities are not culturally sensitive to them. Their findings agree with those of Hartley and Yeowell [53], who also reported the disinterest of some ethnic minority individuals in sports facilities available in their communities. However, this was not the case in this study which found that the respondents had a relatively supportive multicultural environment at the University and that this had empowered them in being physically active.

The female respondents only indicated that they were not sufficiently supported to be physically active in their home countries compared to their time in the UK, and this suggests a significant barrier to physical activity among female ethnic-minority students. These findings agree with other literature finding females from some ethnic minority groups find physical activity culturally inappropriate [12]. Other research [54] has found that some females find it unsafe to engage in certain types of exercise at specific times and locations which consequently limits their levels of physical activity.

In this study, the supportive environment of the students' university encouraged female participants to engage in a variety of activities which motivated them to remain

active. Thus, the university community presented them with a new norm and experience that influenced their active behaviour. A notable contributing factor to this was infrastructural development, such as gyms and basketball courts, and the establishment of new social relationships through university clubs and societies. Additional measures, such as cheap gym membership and healthy newsletters, instigated interest in maintaining or adopting an active lifestyle.

Literature commonly reports that international students struggle to adjust to their new university environment, which leads to social isolation, cultural shock, and challenging university experiences [55–57]. However, our study found contrary results; although students acknowledged that they had initially struggled to adapt to UK culture, weather, and food, the support systems available at their university made their transition relatively easy. This supports the literature [58, 59] that effective support systems for international students are imperative for a successful transition.

In our study, participants were pleased with a variety of social groups, such as basketball, handball, and yoga societies, which accounted for their positive active behaviour. Although some students identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a major barrier to their experiences with these groups, the social bonds they established before the pandemic built some resilience among some students, even during the lockdown. A large body of literature emphasises the devastating impact of COVID-19 on students' health and wellbeing, especially international students [56, 60]. Martinez et al. [61] found that social connections are effective ways to manage health and wellbeing during the pandemic period. Social groups are useful in maintaining an active lifestyle too [62]. This is notable in students' contexts, as research [63] emphasises the need for social support systems at universities. Deliens et al. [24] explained that social support from peers encourages students to remain active. A similar report was made by Alshehri et al. [64], who found a positive association between social support and physical behaviour among international students.

Finally, it was found that almost every participant had some level of knowledge about physical activity and its benefits to wellbeing. It was clear that positive experiences, in addition to this knowledge of the benefits of physical activity, were reflected in motivation to remain active and healthy. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that individuals with knowledge of the benefits of physical activity are more likely to engage in these activities [65]. Although knowledge does not spontaneously determine behaviour change, it is an essential enabler of a positive behaviour change. In this study, the participants emphasised that their theoretical and experiential knowledge of the benefits of physical activity prompted them to remain active in promoting their health and wellbeing.

Our study implies that student groups, including minority students, can engage in high levels of physical activity when appropriate support systems are provided. As our study suggests, although students encountered challenges during their initial moments at the university, it became apparent that they could maximise their active lifestyles by taking advantage of the support they were receiving from the institution. Although our study did not assess whether the provisions were targeted solely at international students, it is evident that such approaches can be adopted for other student groups, especially given the current reports of increasing sedentary behaviours among students and the urgent need to address them.

We acknowledge the limitations of qualitative studies in that generalisations cannot be made. However, the findings of our study suggest areas of potential success in supporting students to stay active. For example, literature suggests that some students have found a lack of social support [25], lack of information about available resources/facilities [24], and high cost of participation [24] as deterrents to engaging in physical activity at their universities. However, the absence of these barriers and the presence of supportive provisions in our study were found to motivate students, and the resulting beneficial experiences promoted an active lifestyle.

It was also evident that the university had an active culture that supported students with a variety of engagement opportunities and support systems. Replicating this model can be a game changer in improving physical activity among students, thereby addressing the current sedentary lifestyle prevalent among students.

5. Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, a standardised tool was not used to measure students' engagement in physical activity. The findings do not provide a robust account of how active students were but focus on their self-reported views. Second, the information gathered from the study is subject to recall bias since respondents had to recall their experiences in the UK and compare them with earlier experiences in their home country. This was minimised by allowing respondents sufficient time to reflect on before responding to the questions during the interviews.

Third, the interviews were conducted during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced the students' responses as we even struggled to recruit participants during the lockdown. We minimised these effects by allowing respondents to choose the most suitable time and location for the interview, and no questions were asked about the pandemic. The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, coupled with time constraints, limited our ability to recruit more participants, even when we found that our participants were more active. Although invitations for additional participants were sent out, no further responses were received.

Furthermore, since only a small number of respondents were recruited for the study, the findings cannot be generalised to Black African international students. Although the sample size was suitable for the philosophical and methodological approaches used in this research, caution must be exercised when interpreting the findings. Finally, the study may be subject to researcher bias due to data collection and interpretation by a student who was himself part of the Black African international student body. This potential bias was minimised through robust approaches in the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes used by the two researchers and peer debriefing.

6. Conclusion

This research provides insights into the experiences of Black African international university students in physical activity in the UK. The findings suggest that universities play a critical role in how students from minority groups engage in and experience physical activity. Multiple factors simultaneously contribute to students' access to various opportunities to stay active and shape their overall experiences. These factors include affordable gym memberships, diverse social groups, gender-inclusive environments, and other support services that facilitate students' participation in physical activities. Furthermore, students' prior knowledge of the benefits of physical activity, combined with their personal experiences, fosters resilience and enables them to develop and maintain a healthy and active lifestyle while at university.

Despite facing challenges such as cultural adjustment difficulties upon arrival and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, students maintained a positive attitude towards physical activity due to the presence of multifunctional support systems. These support systems helped them overcome obstacles and maintain active lifestyles. This study underscores the need for increased education, opportunities, and inclusive environments for individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly female Black African international students, to adapt and sustain an active lifestyle. Such approaches could be effective for different student groups in promoting active lifestyles.

Future research should focus on other ethnic minority groups and conduct large-scale population studies to gain a deeper understanding of how these groups can be best supported in the wider community to be physically active. This, in turn, would improve their overall quality of life as well as health, career, and educational outcomes.

Data Availability

The data used to support this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Additional Points

What is Known on the Topic?. (i) Physical activity provides many health benefits and improves people's quality of life. (ii) People from ethnic minority backgrounds are not active enough to maintain a healthy life compared to other dominant groups; however, a few studies have examined this. (iii) No research has explored how international students, including students of African descent, are supported to stay or maintain an active life at university. *What this Paper Adds?*. (i) An in-depth account of the perception of ethnic minority students on how they feel supported at their university amidst adaptation challenges. (ii) Black African students can be supported to be physically active through multifunctional support systems, such as cheap gym memberships, sports facilities, variable groups, and support services provided by their universities.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Supplementary Materials

A complete set of questions that served as a guide for the semistructured interview with participants has been provided in Appendix 1. (*Supplementary Materials*)

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